

NOTES FOR QUERIES

FAKELORE VS. FOLKLORE -- AGAIN

Students of American folklore are well aware of the storm Richard Dorson unleashed in 1950 when he coined the term "fakelore" and dared to assert that the Elementary School Librarians' personal folklore hero rested, as he put it in American Folklore, "on little or no oral tradition" (p. 214).

The battle raged on for several years, but only among scholars and it seemed to have passed. Today, most students of American folklore are aware of this famous scholarly battle -- aware, yes; but only as (depending upon their level of studentism): 1) a question that might show up again on the U.S. folklore prelim, or 2) a lecture topic to be pulled out of the academic hat on some dreary Monday morning when nothing else is prepared, or 3) an interesting footnote to the history of folklore scholarship (the pun heard around the world).

However, by chance I happened upon a series of newspaper articles last summer that indicates that American popular press may just be discovering the issue and girding for yet another round.

The first hint that something was in the wind was a summary of Dorson's "fakelore" theory by an old friend of his, Russell Kirk, in the Orlando Sentinel which was sent to me by my father. The article seemed reasonable and fair and apparently stirred little comment or interest.

I thought little of the matter when I read Kirk's article, but then the St. Louis Post-Dispatch ran an article August 13 on the editorial page that compounded the mystery. First of all, it purported to be reprinted from the Wall Street Journal, but a search of the Index to the Wall Street Journal for the past year and throughout August failed to reveal any such source. Secondly, the article was stronger in tone and referred to "Dorson and other debunkers" and was accompanied by an open invitation to revolt by a local editor which I quote in full, both because of its obvious importance and because I can't understand it anyhow:

An article reprinted on this page debunking certain "folklore" may stir some replies, and we invite them, not ourselves being sure of the facts. The trouble is that folklore is not often factual to begin with, else it might not be folklore. But proving factually that folklore is not folklore is something else again. Casey Jones, for example, was a real-enough railroad engineer, though not on the Cannonball, and what is folklore about him is the song supposedly first sung by an engine wiper in Memphis. It was fact turned fiction that became folklore. So what happens when the fiction is reduced to the fact of some fictitious promotion, yet still becomes a part of a folk tradition? Can such fiction be reduced to fact and, if so, what do we call it? Not folklore?

As might be expected, there were replies in the next few days in the "Letters to the Editor" column and they were all critical of the Dorson position.

These articles I noted pose several interesting queries: 1) Was there an article in the Wall Street Journal sometime before the Post-Dispatch reprint of August 13, and if so, why isn't it indexed in the Index? 2) Have other Forum readers across America noted other attacks on the fakelore theory? 3) In light of this beating of a dead "ism," how can we better communicate folklore scholarship to the press and general public? 4) Is it a plot? Are they out to get us? Will the next spate of articles note that Thompson doesn't like apple pie? Should we get passports just in case?

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A FOLK 'DIGITAL' COMPUTER

The recent discovery by Inta Carpenter of traditional mathematical riddles among Latvian-Americans* points up a common hiatus in field collections: "mathlore." As an example of this type of material, I offer the folk "digital" computer known to the peasants of southeastern Europe and the traders of the Middle East from remote antiquity to the middle nineteenth century. From our impoverished modern viewpoint, fingers are only useful for counting up to ten. I will demonstrate that the digits of both hands can be manipulated to perform operations of a much more sophisticated nature. Since I have no knowledge of how this computational technique was taught traditionally, the following description of the operations themselves is couched in the terms of formally-taught arithmetic.

The basis of the computer is the assignment of quantitative values to each of the fingers in the following manner.

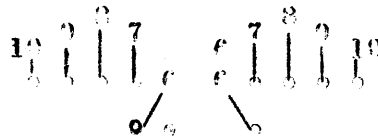


Fig. 1

In Figure 1, you are looking at the backs of your hands with your fingers outstretched. Ethnographically, these values, six through ten, define the computational limits of the system: six times six through ten times ten. However, as will be illustrated below, five times five may be considered as the possible lower computational limit.

The operations of the computer are based on the following qualitative binary opposition at each digit: finger outstretched vs. finger folded or finger seen/finger unseen (finger+/finger-). This is not to suggest that the overall system is binary; it is decimal, but the states at each digital position are based on a binary opposition. Diagrammatically and symbolically, I will express finger outstretched as o--- or + and finger folded as o or --.

*Folklore Forum 6:2 (1973): in press.